

# **Testimony for Senate Transportation Committee on RTA**

***Bob Morris, SEMCOG Policy Advisor***

Senator Casperson and members of the Committee, SEMCOG appreciates the opportunity to speak in support of SB 909, the Regional Transit Authority Legislation.

SEMCOG has supported public transportation in our region since the inception of our organization. For many years, we have believed that the only way to truly implement a successful regional public transportation system in Southeast Michigan is through an RTA.

As you know, we are not the only ones to take this position. Regional leaders; private sector groups, including our sister organization the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition; and our newspapers support the implementation of an RTA. Not long ago, Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood was in Detroit and essentially said the first step our region must take to develop a regional transit system was to implement an RTA. Certainly, the fact that Secretary LaHood has committed his time and energy to our region is a great opportunity. We don't want to let him down.

Once the legislature passes this legislation, the heavy lifting begins to take place. It starts with a number of mandated assignments. The RTA has many tasks to perform, among them are:

- Develop and finalize a regional transportation plan.
- Continue the initial steps that have begun in implementing a Bus Rapid Transit network.
- Develop an overall funding plan for operations and implanting projects.

Thus, forming an RTA does not instantly solve our transit challenges in our region – it is only the beginning. Implementation of the legislation will not instantly mean the funding will be there to implement a BRT or other types of transit programs. First, the RTA will have to go to the people of the region with a reasonable plan and ask for their financial support. Having financial resources will put us in a better position to be able to apply and match potential federal transportation funds, that frankly we cannot successfully complete for right now.

As the RTA evolves, SEMCOG is prepared to work with the RTA to develop the necessary plans and strategies to help them be successful.

There is one issue that you might consider as the bill moves through the process, and that is the start-up funding that is provided in the bill. The bill currently directs \$250,000 for initial RTA start-up costs. As an initial member of the DARTA board, appointed by County Executive Ficano, I can state emphatically that not having initial start up funding put our fledgling effort behind the 8-ball. A \$250,000 appropriation is better than we had, but I fear it will not be enough to get the job done.

We understand the committee is considering public hearings in Southeast Michigan. If that's the case, perhaps SEMCOG can come back and provide more detail regarding how the federal funding process works and the steps the RTA will have to take to successfully receive federal funding for a BRT and other transit projects. This is a very competitive process, one in which many states are competing for a continually declining amount of federal dollars.

In closing, let me just say that SEMCOG appreciates the committee's quick action on this legislation. We extend any and all of SEMCOG's transit and funding expertise to the committee as this legislation moves forward.

Finally, Paul Tait and the entire SEMCOG organization extend an invitation to the committee to hold any Southeast Michigan hearings at our SEMCOG offices in Downtown Detroit.